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Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Central African Republic

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions, is my third on the situation of children and armed conflict in the Central African Republic. It focuses on the six grave violations committed against children and provides information on the perpetrators and the context in which the violations took place.

The report addresses the devastating effect of the cycles of violence on children in the Central African Republic during the period from January 2011 to December 2015. It provides information on the large-scale recruitment and use of children by armed groups and on the continuing trends of killing and maiming, sexual violence and attacks on schools and hospitals throughout the reporting period. The report also highlights patterns of abduction and the denial of humanitarian access by non-State armed groups and provides information on grave violations against children committed by international forces deployed in the country.

Also set out in the report are a series of recommendations, aimed at preventing and ending grave violations against children in the Central African Republic and at improving measures to protect them.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and subsequent resolutions. It covers the period from January 2011 to December 2015 and highlights the trends and patterns of grave violations committed against children in the Central African Republic since my previous report (S/2011/241). It also outlines the progress made and challenges encountered since the conclusions adopted on 6 July 2011 by the Council's Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict (see S/AC.51/2011/5). Where possible, the report identifies the parties responsible for the grave violations committed against children in the country. With regard to those parties, the ex-Séléka and associated armed groups and the anti-Balaka were listed in the annexes to my most recent annual report on children and armed conflict (A/69/926-S/2015/409) for their recruitment and use of children, for killing or maiming children and for committing sexual violence against children. Ex-Séléka and associated armed groups were also listed for perpetrating attacks on schools and hospitals.

2. There were significant changes in the dynamics and nature of the conflict in the Central African Republic during the reporting period. The situation of children deteriorated throughout the country, particularly in December 2012 and March 2013, as Séléka ravaged the country ahead of and during its takeover of the Government, and during the outbreak of intercommunal and interreligious violence that erupted in December 2013. The existence of multiple armed groups active at different phases of the conflict, many of which ceased to exist or re-emerged under new names, or fragmented with unclear chains of command, has added to the complexity of the situation. In this context, monitoring and reporting on grave violations has remained extremely challenging, compounded by political instability, insecurity and logistical and capacity constraints. Consequently, some allegations of grave violations against children could not be verified by the country task force on monitoring and reporting. The country task force met regularly until the end of 2012, but reduced its activities after the evacuation of United Nations personnel. It was reactivated in February 2014 and has since been operational. In the light of these limitations, it is important to note that the data collected is only indicative of the full extent of the grave violations committed against children in the Central African Republic during the reporting period.

II. Overview of the political, military and security situation

A. January 2011 to December 2012

3. Presidential elections and the first round of legislative elections were held on 23 January and 12 February 2011, respectively. The Constitutional Court declared the incumbent president, François Bozizé, the winner. The result of the presidential elections was rejected by the opposition, who boycotted the second round of the legislative elections that took place in March 2011. On 6 January 2012, the leaders of four politico-military movements involved in the national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process were arrested, including the leader of the Armée populaire pour la restauration de la République et de la démocratie (APRD) and the leader of the Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement (UFDR). During the period following the election of President Bozizé, and up

through 2012, the United Nations also noted a surge in reports of human rights violations perpetrated by Central African Republic security and defence forces, in particular the Presidential Guard.

4. These developments prompted the opposition to attempt to rally the population against the Government, but without success. Armed groups already active in the northern part of the country resumed fighting against the weak Government, which had little administrative or security presence outside the capital, in particular in border areas. On 10 December 2012, a rebel offensive began when elements of UFDR occupied the north-western towns of Ndélé, Ouadda and Sam Ouandja. UFDR forces were later joined by three other movements: the newly created Convention patriotique pour le salut du Kodro, the Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la paix (CPJP) and the Union des forces républicaines. These movements organized themselves into a loose coalition, Séléka, under the leadership of Michel Djotodia, and claimed that President Bozizé had failed to uphold the terms of the peace agreements signed in 2007 and 2008. Within a few months of the elections, these armed groups, with the support of foreign elements, took control of the northern and eastern parts of the Central African Republic. President Bozizé responded by calling on the population to resist, distributing machetes and using a youth militia, the Coalition citoyenne d'opposition aux rébellions armées, to attack Séléka and Muslim communities.

5. In this context, growing tensions between Christian and Muslim communities were fuelled and manipulated by political leaders. Séléka comprised a heterogeneous group of former members of armed groups, disgruntled ex-combatants who had helped to bring Mr. Bozizé to power, deserters from the Presidential Guard and foreign armed elements from neighbouring countries. This heterogeneity weakened an already tenuous chain of command and contributed to an atmosphere of impunity, in which elements committed numerous and serious human rights violations.

B. January to November 2013

6. With the aim of bringing the conflict with Séléka to an end, peace talks were held under the auspices of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and resulted in the signing in Libreville on 11 January 2013 of peace and ceasefire agreements, which provided for transition and power-sharing measures. The agreements were not implemented, however, and in March 2013, Séléka resumed fighting and moved through the country towards Bangui, burning villages, killing, looting, raping and forcibly enlisting children. On 24 March, Séléka seized Bangui, forcing President Bozizé to flee the country. The national army (Forces armées centrafricaines), the police and the gendarmerie deserted their positions and confiscated weapons that would be used months later by community-based armed militias to dislodge Séléka from Bangui and other parts of the country. On 13 April, a national transitional council was formed to replace the Parliament and, on 18 August, Michel Djotodia proclaimed himself Head of State. In March and April, respectively, the Security Council and the Peace and Security Council of the African Union condemned the unconstitutional seizure of power by Séléka. ECCAS increased the size of its Mission for the Consolidation of Peace in the Central African Republic, which has been present in the country since 2008, and the African Union Peace and Security Council established the African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA) on 19 July.

7. The takeover by Séléka plunged the country into a state of lawlessness, as national security and defence forces disintegrated and the security situation significantly deteriorated. Members of the predominantly Muslim Séléka committed large-scale human rights violations and engaged in looting with total impunity. Their targeting of non-Muslims created resentment within Christian communities and fuelled religious tensions.

8. Persistent tensions between different factions of Séléka risked a confrontation within the coalition. As a result, in September 2013, President Djotodia officially dismantled the coalition by presidential decree. However, Séléka units that refused to disband quickly reorganized themselves under the name of "ex-Séléka" and continued to commit widespread human rights violations.

9. During this same period, self-defence groups that had existed before the Séléka takeover re-emerged in late 2013, under the name of "anti-Balaka". Anti-Balaka were organized and trained by former national army, police and gendarmerie officers.

C. December 2013 to August 2014

10. On 5 December 2013, anti-Balaka attacked ex-Séléka positions in Bangui and in Bossangoa (Ouham prefecture), which triggered widespread violence between Christian and Muslim communities across the country. Close to 2,000 civilians were reportedly killed in Bangui in just a few days. On 9 December, France launched Operation Sangaris in support of MISCA, and the disarmament of some groups, mostly ex-Séléka, commenced in Bangui. However, a wave of attacks by the Christian majority against the Muslim minority triggered massive population displacement in Bangui and in other parts of the country. Both communities reportedly committed revenge killings and other human rights violations, which reached gruesome levels of cruelty. It is estimated that these attacks generated the highest number of internally displaced persons and refugees over the past decade, including 435,000 displaced persons and 450,000 refugees, the majority of whom were Muslims, who fled to neighbouring countries between 2013 and 2014.

11. Under international and domestic pressure, President Djotodia was forced to resign on 10 January 2014. Catherine Samba-Panza was elected transitional Head of State on 20 January by a newly-established national transitional council. In the period that followed, the situation continued to be highly volatile, characterized by a cycle of reprisal attacks, often religiously motivated, by armed groups and individuals. The situation was compounded by the absence of State authority outside Bangui, weak State institutions, and the fragmentation of, and internal leadership struggles within, anti-Balaka and ex-Séléka. The vast majority of Muslims left Bangui, and those who remained were placed under international protection in the PK5 neighbourhood. Outside Bangui, violent clashes continued between ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka, which progressively consolidated their control over parts of the country, particularly the north and the west.

12. On 23 July 2014, an agreement on the cessation of hostilities was signed in Brazzaville, which led to the gradual restoration of calm in Bangui and set the ground rules for the completion of the transition process such as the holding of elections, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, and national reconciliation.

D. September 2014 to December 2015

13. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) was deployed in September 2014, replacing MISCA. The Mission, which was mandated to protect civilians and support the transition, played a positive role, in collaboration with Operation Sangaris and the European Union Force, in stabilizing the security situation in the months that followed its deployment.

14. The Bangui Forum for National Reconciliation, held in May 2015, and the preceding nationwide popular consultations culminated in the signing of an agreement on the principles of disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation, and the integration of armed elements into the uniformed State forces of the Central African Republic. The Bangui Forum represented an important event in the transition process and raised expectations that genuine reconciliation, social cohesion and durable stability was possible. More importantly, on 5 May 2015, 10 armed groups,[1] including factions of ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka, signed an agreement to stop and prevent the recruitment and use of children and other grave violations against children. However, attempts to destabilize the political transition resulted in the outbreak of violence in Bangui on 26 September, which led to hundreds of civilians being killed and injured and to further displacement of the population.

15. In a positive development, a referendum held on 13 December 2015 endorsed the new Constitution. Furthermore, over 95 per cent of eligible Central Africans registered to vote in the legislative and presidential elections. On 30 December 2015, the first round of presidential and legislative elections was held, representing an important step towards ending the transition.

III. Grave violations committed against children in armed conflict

16. Conflict and instability in the Central African Republic have had a devastating impact on children. Serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law were perpetrated by all parties to the conflict, including Séléka, ex-Séléka and its subsequent factions, anti-Balaka and unidentified armed men. Monitoring and verification by the United Nations and its partners remained difficult in conflict-affected areas during the reporting period. As noted in the introductory section above, the information presented in the present report is only indicative of the full extent of the grave violations committed against children.

[1] Anti-Balaka, Front démocratique pour le progrès de la Centrafrique (FDPC), Front populaire pour la renaissance de la centrafrique (FPRC), Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricains pour la justice (MLCJ), Rassemblement patriotique pour le renouveau de la Centrafrique (RPRC), Révolution et justice, Séléka rénovée, Union pour la paix en Centrafrique (UPC), Union des forces républicaines (UFR) and Union des forces républicaines fondamentales (UFRF).

A. Recruitment and use of children

17. During the reporting period, armed groups, including self-defence groups, recruited and used large numbers of children. In 2014, a study sponsored by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated that between 6,000 and 10,000 children were associated with armed groups, a surge attributed to the increased activities of anti-Balaka since 2013. From January 2014 to December 2015, the country task force separated 5,541 children (4,274 boys, 1,267 girls) from armed groups. However, the country task force was only able to document a total of 715 children, including 114 girls, as being newly recruited and used. Of the total number of children recruited and used, 90 per cent have been documented from 2013 onwards. Children were recruited and used by all parties to the conflict, including foreign armed groups such as the Chadian Front populaire pour le redressement (FPR) and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Not only were children brutalized with regard to being used in combat and as sex slaves but they were also forced to perform various support roles, including as informants. Since 2014, children have been increasingly used to commit violations against civilians.

18. From 2011 to December 2012, children were reportedly recruited and used to fight alongside armed groups that were active mostly in the northern part of the country, such as the Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la paix (CPJP), UFDR, the Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricain pour la justice (MLCJ), the Front démocratique du peuple centrafricain and the Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la paix fondamentale. Foreign armed groups, including FPR and LRA, also recruited and used children.

19. Children were recruited in large numbers, particularly after the emergence of Séléka and in support of the expansion of self-defence militias. As the situation deteriorated significantly as of March 2013, reports of large-scale recruitment and use of children were received by the country task force, although generalized insecurity did not allow for full verification. In 2013, the country task force documented the recruitment and use of 188 children (171 boys, 17 girls) by anti-Balaka and Séléka, both prior to and after its dismantlement. There were unverified reports of children being used in nearly every town under Séléka control and of children manning anti-Balaka checkpoints, including in Bangui. The re-recruitment of separated children was also a common feature. For example, on 1 April 2013, 41 children (36 boys, 5 girls) who had been separated from CPJP in 2012 in Ndélé and Bria and transferred to Bangui for their protection, were re-recruited by Séléka commanders, who had forcefully entered a UNICEF-supported transit and orientation centre. In December 2013, five boys, who had been separated from Séléka and reunified with their families, were re-recruited by anti-Balaka in Bangui.

20. In the period from December 2013 until the end of 2014, the country task force verified 464 cases of new recruitment, including 446 by anti-Balaka (360 boys, 86 girls) and 18 boys by ex-Séléka. In addition, 2,807 children (2,161 boys, 646 girls) were identified and verified among armed groups, including anti-Balaka (2,347 children), different factions of ex-Séléka (446 children), LRA (13 children) and 1 boy was separated from Révolution et justice.

21. Children associated with anti-Balaka were seen manning checkpoints and reportedly being trained in handling weapons and combat, and used to fight against ex-Séléka. According to one report, on 24 June 2014, children were seen among an

anti-Balaka group that was besieging the town of Bambari. During the screening of an anti-Balaka group in September 2014, several children stated that they had been sent to spy on ex-Séléka positions and on members of Muslim communities. In October 2014, several hundred children were observed among anti-Balaka elements and demonstrators in Bangui, many of them were manning barricades. Children were also used by anti-Balaka to lure international forces into ambushes. It is reported that, on 9 October 2014, anti-Balaka fighters in the Combatant neighbourhood of Bangui used children as decoys before attacking MINUSCA forces. With regard to ex-Séléka, it is reported that, on 9 June 2014, members of a humanitarian mission visiting the locality of Bakala (Ouaka prefecture) observed several children with members of the Union pour la paix en Centrafrique (UPC), an ex-Séléka faction. An undetermined number of children were also reportedly sighted participating in attacks against non-Muslims in Bambari in June 2014.

22. In 2015, 39 children (28 boys, 11 girls) were verified as having been newly recruited, the majority by LRA (21 children) and by ex-Séléka factions such as UPC (13 children). However, during the outbreak of violence that erupted on 26 September, hundreds of children were observed either manning checkpoints or erecting barricades in Bangui. On numerous occasions, armed men suspected to be anti-Balaka reportedly used children as shields while firing at MINUSCA forces. The use of children as shields by anti-Balaka was also documented by the country task force in June 2015, when anti-Balaka fired at a MINUSCA patrol from the yard of Lycée Boganda, where dozens of children were taking part in a physical education examination. The recruitment of children was also documented outside Bangui. In August 2015, two brothers were interviewed in the subprefecture of Mbrès (Nana-Grebizi). They had been carrying out domestic chores and serving at an FPRC checkpoint and stated that they had joined the group in early 2014, after anti-Balaka members had killed their parents in the western part of the country.

B. Killing and maiming

23. During the reporting period, the country task force documented the killing of 333 children (258 boys, 75 girls) and the maiming of 589 (452 boys, 137 girls). These figures are believed to be highly underestimated. Children have been killed and maimed by anti-Balaka, CPJP, LRA, MLJC, UFDR and all the groups that formed Séléka and ex-Séléka. Children were killed and maimed during clashes between armed groups in attacks on their communities and, since December 2013 children have also been targeted on the basis of their religious affiliation. More than half of the total number of the children killed, and nearly 80 per cent of the children maimed, during the reporting period were documented in 2013 and 2014.

24. In 2011, 88 children (63 boys, 25 girls) were killed and/or maimed by armed groups. Children were mostly killed during armed confrontations between CPJP and UFDR. In 2012, 10 children were documented as having been killed, although the number is estimated to be higher. It is known that four children were killed and an unverified number injured during fighting between the Forces armées centrafricaines and FPR in January 2012 in Nana-Gribizi prefecture. The relatively smaller numbers in 2012 are believed to be linked to the end of hostilities between CPJP and UFDR, and because insecurity impeded monitoring by child protection actors.

25. From December 2012 until the end of 2013, incidents of killing and maiming were verified during two major outbreaks of violence: the seizure of power by Séléka and the intercommunal and retaliatory attacks by ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka that spiked as of 5 December 2012. In most of the incidents in 2013, it was reported that children were killed and maimed in crossfire. The country task force documented 27 children killed and 115 maimed during that period.

26. The upsurge of violence in the aftermath of the events of 5 December 2013 in Bangui reached an unprecedented scale and claimed the lives of thousands of civilians. Among them, 146 children were documented as having been killed, and 289 children were documented as having been maimed in 2014. It is believed that hundreds of children were killed and maimed, often brutally, by machete, firearm and other weaponry in attacks against their communities. Targeted attacks were also reported, including an incident in which four boys were beheaded by ex-Séléka in Bangui in January 2014, in retaliation for an attack against Muslims. There were also reports of incidents that occurred in the period between January and February 2014, which claimed the lives of 22 children (13 boys, 9 girls) in reprisal attacks by anti-Balaka against ex-Séléka and Muslim civilians in Baoro, Bangui, Boali, Boda, Bossamptele, Bossambélé, Bossangoa, Carnot and Yaloke. A failed reconciliation attempt between anti-Balaka and the residents of the PK5 neighbourhood in Bangui resulted in confrontations on 25 July, which caused injuries to 16 boys and 13 girls. On 7 August 2014, youths associated with ex-Séléka attacked the St. Joseph Cathedral in Bambari, killing 20 children (19 boys, 1 girl) and injuring 3 girls and 1 boy. Street and unaccompanied children were also at particular risk of retaliatory violence because the shelters where they usually received assistance could no longer provide assistance and protection. Children were also victims of explosive remnants of war, as for example, in a village near Paoua on 11 December, when six children died while playing with a grenade that exploded.

27. There was a period of relative calm during most of 2015, until 26 September when a new outbreak of violence erupted in Bangui. The country task force verified the killing of 62 children (49 boys, 13 girls) and the maiming of 185 (155 boys, 30 girls) by anti-Balaka, FPRC and unidentified armed men. Some of the children were killed in anti-Balaka and ex-Séléka crossfire. In particular, the outbreak of violence in Bangui in September and October 2015, prompted by the beheading of a 16-year-old Muslim motorcyclist, claimed the lives of 28 children and caused injury to 31 others. Of those numbers, 16 were killed and 19 injured during the first four days alone.

C. Rape and other forms of sexual violence

28. The country task force verified that a total of 521 children (513 girls, 8 boys) were victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence: 3 cases in 2011, 22 in 2012, 20 in 2013, 406 in 2014 and 70 in 2015, with the substantial increase in the number of documented cases in 2014 not only being attributed to the surge in violence and armed confrontations countrywide as of December 2013 but also to the presence of larger number of humanitarian actors in certain areas, who could verify cases. Sexual violence was perpetrated by all parties to the conflict, with sexual violence against children by ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka forming part of a larger pattern of violations against civilians in areas under their control, particularly in 2014.

29. Although believed to be widespread, sexual violence remained underreported. It is believed that many victims do not report such violence out of fear of stigmatization, shame, risk of rejection by the spouse or family or fear of reprisals by suspected perpetrators. Indeed, reports indicate that victims and their families are routinely threatened to keep silent. Underreporting has also been compounded by a lack of trust in or access to the judiciary and the absence of State authority across the country. The disintegration of the judicial system and the security forces has contributed to a climate of widespread impunity and the absence of protective measures to separate victims of sexual violence from perpetrators. Furthermore, chronic insecurity has hampered access to assistance for victims.

30. Approximately 50 per cent of the 406 cases of sexual violence documented in 2014 were perpetrated by ex-Séléka (205 cases), 46 per cent by anti-Balaka (187 cases) and the remaining 4 per cent were attributed to members of the national police or unidentified individuals. Reports indicate that, in areas under ex-Séléka control, armed elements went door to door looking for girls. On 16 November 2014, a 13-year-old girl and her older sister were gang-raped by 12 unidentified individuals who attacked their village on the road from Bria to Ndélé; both victims later died. On 14 November 2014 in Bangui, two sisters were gang-raped at gunpoint by two anti-Balaka members. The suspected perpetrators were later arrested by MINUSCA and handed over to the Gendarmerie. As of December 2015, an investigation was yet to be conducted.

31. Parties to the conflict continued to commit rape and other forms of sexual violence in 2015. For example, on 24 June 2015, armed UPC elements in Mbrès raped two girls who were returning from the market. A particularly stark example of sexual violence committed by an armed group took place in August 2015. In that incident, two young female street vendors were abducted by three armed anti-Balaka members in Bangui and taken to the village of Vodambola, where they were continuously raped for five days. Upon their release, the victims sought and received medical support.

D. Attacks on schools and hospitals

32. The already fragile education and health systems were severely affected by the conflict and hundreds of thousands of children were deprived of their fundamental rights to education and basic health care. Schools and hospitals were attacked, destroyed, burned, and systematically looted during armed confrontations between parties to the conflict; education and health personnel were threatened and killed; and schools and hospitals were used for military purposes. The country task force verified a total of 131 incidents of attacks against schools (98 incidents) and hospitals (33 incidents) during the reporting period.

33. In 2011, 12 schools were attacked or damaged in crossfire by APRD, CPJP, FPR, and the Forces armées centrafricaines. Schools were also attacked if they were being used by one of the parties to the conflict. For example, on 5 January 2011, the Yangoudrondja primary school, located 135 km from Bria, was destroyed by CPJP elements; the headmaster and some of the teachers were severely beaten. Teachers living in CPJP-controlled areas and teaching in UFDR areas were accused of complicity with UFDR and threatened by CPJP. In 2012, the country task force recorded 10 incidents of attack and 2 incidents of military use of schools by CPJP.

34. From December 2012 to the end of the reporting period, the country task force witnessed a surge in the number of attacks on schools (36), all perpetrated by ex-Séléka. Attacks on schools, teachers and students are believed to have been part of a pattern of violations committed by armed groups. The United Nations received reports of looting of schools by armed groups, including following their rehabilitation, which resulted in long-term school closures. For example, three schools were looted in Damara, north of Bangui, in May 2013, and benches, doors and windows were taken by members of Séléka. In August 2013, in the Basse-Kotto region, two schools were repeatedly attacked by patrolling Séléka and two others were damaged during retaliatory attacks by Séléka on communities accused of not being supportive. Three schools were also damaged during clashes between ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka in Ndélé and Bambari during the same period.

35. The country task force documented 36 cases of military use of schools, mostly by factions of ex-Séléka, from December 2012 onwards. More recently, in December 2014 and January 2015, FPRC elements used the primary school of Boto (Nana-Grebizi prefecture) to launch attacks against anti-Balaka. The school was vacated following advocacy by the country task force. On 20 January 2015, anti-Balaka elements in Bangui expelled pupils from their classrooms in three primary schools and used the schools as their base. Violence also hindered the return of both teachers and students to schools.

36. Hospitals, health centres and related protected personnel have also been attacked, particularly from 2013 onwards, and medical facilities have been looted by all parties in the turmoil leading up to March 2013 and during the months that followed. On 5 December 2013, ex-Séléka attacked the Hôpital de l'Amitié, one of the main hospitals in Bangui, and summarily executed 10 patients. As a result, medical personnel and patients fled the hospital, which was closed for a month, reopening following the introduction of security measures by MISCA. On 26 April 2014, an attack by ex-Séléka against a health centre in the village of Boguila resulted in the killing of 22 civilians, including 3 humanitarian workers. The health centre was therefore closed, depriving some 5,000 children of medical services. On 27 February 2015, anti-Balaka carjacked a national blood bank vehicle in Bangui, thereby preventing the supply of blood to patients in several hospitals in Bangui and in neighbouring localities. On 15 March 2015, a nurse working in a dispensary in Bambari was abducted and killed by three members of anti-Balaka, who accused her of having spread information regarding their plan to attack the village of Ngaluwa (Ouaka prefecture); two suspects were arrested and handed over to the Gendarmerie.

37. Hospitals and health centres were also used for military purposes. In 2015, the country task force documented two cases of military use by factions of ex-Séléka.

E. Abductions

38. The country task force documented the abduction of 257 children (195 boys, 62 girls) between the ages of 3 and 17 during the reporting period. Nearly 70 per cent of the abductions (180) documented were attributed to LRA, with a peak in 2011 (101), the year in which LRA was most active. As violence intensified from December 2012 onwards, other armed groups, including Séléka (and subsequently, ex-Séléka), anti-Balaka and unidentified armed men, also abducted children.

39. Children abducted by LRA were used as porters, to loot goods and in other support roles. Abducted girls endured sexual violence while in captivity. In August 2011, four girls who had been abducted and later released by LRA reported that they had been used as cooks, but were also shared among commanders as "wives". LRA activities decreased in 2013 and 2014 owing to the military operations against them by the African Union Regional Task Force. However, there were reports that children continued to be abducted to carry looted goods and were kept in captivity for short periods of approximately two or three days. In April 2015, MINUSCA interviewed a boy who had escaped from LRA. He said that he had been abducted on 4 December 2014 together with 10 other children, including 7 girls, in the village of Moroubanda (Nana-Grebizi prefecture) by 23 armed LRA members.

40. Children abducted by Séléka were used as combatants as well as in support roles. The abduction of children for ransom increased and became a lucrative activity during the reporting period. On 4 August 2013, five children (three boys, two girls) between the ages of 1 and 6 were abducted by Séléka elements near the town of Ndélé and a ransom was demanded. The children were rescued two days later by a rival group of Séléka combatants from Kaga Bandoro. In February 2014, two girls were abducted in Bangui, allegedly by anti-Balaka who threatened to kill them if a ransom was not paid. The girls were rescued by another group of anti-Balaka and handed over to the United Nations which facilitated their reunification. Criminally motivated abductions continued to be observed in 2015.

41. Children were also abducted by ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka on the suspicion of being informants. In March 2014, four boys suspected of acting as informants for ex-Séléka were kidnapped by anti-Balaka elements in Bangui. The victims were held for four days before being released, following pressure from the country task force. In June 2014, eyewitness reports implied that many adults and children suspected of being anti-Balaka informants were abducted by ex-Séléka in Bambari and later executed.

F. Denial of humanitarian access

42. Denial of humanitarian access was a concern, with 284 incidents recorded by the country task force during the reporting period,[2] which affected the delivery of assistance to hundreds of thousands of children. Humanitarian access was a challenge throughout the period owing to the remoteness of affected areas, insecurity, lawlessness and the targeting of humanitarian actors in the latter part of the reporting period.

43. In 2011 and 2012, humanitarian access was difficult and limited in Bamingui-Bangoran, Vakaga, Haute-Kotto, Mbomou and Haut-Mbomou, Basse-Kotto and Ouham prefectures due to the presence of armed groups. The abduction of eight staff members of an international non-governmental organization (NGO) was documented in January 2011.

44. As insecurity spread across the country in December 2012, the premises of international NGOs were looted and humanitarian organizations repeatedly highlighted security concerns as the factor that most limited their operations. In February 2013, for example, two humanitarian convoys delivering aid to

[2] Twenty-four incidents verified in 2011, 18 in 2012, 22 in 2013, 80 in 2014 and 140 in 2015.

populations in Séléka-controlled areas were blocked by the Forces armées centrafricaines which believed the aid was destined for Séléka fighters. In the same month, Séléka prevented a United Nations Humanitarian Air Service plane from landing at the Bria airstrip (Haute-Kotto prefecture), which led to the delay and cancellation of humanitarian assistance for this region. On 24 August 2013, two national staff members of an international NGO were killed by Séléka elements while returning from Bossangoa. They were using satellite phones and thus accused of spying for anti-Balaka.

45. The events of December 2013 and the cycle of retaliatory attacks that followed limited the ability of humanitarian organizations to assist displaced communities, even in internally displaced persons sites in Bangui. It is estimated that approximately 400,000 children were deprived of basic humanitarian assistance during that period. Negotiations for humanitarian access were challenging owing to unclear chains of command within the armed groups.

46. On 13 April 2014, a truck loaded with 850 bags of food for internally displaced persons was attacked and pillaged by anti-Balaka. On 23 June 2014, armed ex-Séléka stormed the office of an international NGO in Bambari and demanded that staff hand over anti-Balaka members who they believed the organization was sheltering. Following that incident, the international NGO suspended its activities, which mainly benefited children, and all humanitarian staff were evacuated from Bambari.

47. During 2014 and 2015, the nature of the incidents affecting humanitarian actors and access became increasingly criminal. Unidentified armed individuals or alleged affiliates of ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka impeded the provision of humanitarian assistance, often as a lucrative activity. Many humanitarian convoys were looted, and pillaged goods were later found for sale in nearby markets. Armed robberies were committed at several international NGO offices and staff residences, forcing them to suspend activities. On numerous occasions, across the country, humanitarian convoys were requested to pay a fee of passage at checkpoints. Several international NGO vehicles were hijacked in Bangui, allegedly by anti-Balaka elements. By September 2015, over 200 humanitarian workers who had been victims of attacks were relocated to neighbouring countries. Since October 2015, they have progressively returned to the Central African Republic.

G. Grave violations against children by international forces

48. During the reporting period, a number of international forces were deployed to the Central African Republic at different times and with different mandates. The United Nations documented grave violations against children committed by some of those forces. Numerous cases of violations such as rape and sexual violence committed by both United Nations and non-United Nations forces have been documented, some on a repetitive basis. The cases were referred to the appropriate authorities for action. The situation is the subject of ongoing, urgent discussion within the United Nations, with a focus on closing institutional gaps, ensuring prevention and protection and, more importantly, ensuring that all victims receive necessary assistance. The conditions in the country, notably ongoing conflict, the breakdown of law and order, and pervasive impunity, have contributed to the

conditions that enabled such horrendous acts to be committed across the country by international and other forces.

49. In 2014, the United Nations interviewed several boys between the ages of 9 and 13, following allegations of repeated acts of sexual violence reportedly committed between December 2013 and May 2014 by elements of Operation Sangaris in and around the M'Poko camp for internally displaced persons. The French authorities opened a judicial investigation in July 2014, which was ongoing as of December 2015.

50. Rape and other forms of sexual violence were also committed by members of other international forces. In 2013, two incidents of sexual violence were committed by the Uganda People's Defence Forces, which is deployed in the Central African Republic under the command of the African Union Regional Task Force in Obo. In one of the incidents, which occurred on 29 August, a 17-year-old girl was raped by two Uganda People's Defence Forces soldiers; in the other incident, which occurred on 10 October, another girl was sexually abused by three soldiers of the same force. UNICEF has advocated with the Ugandan authorities to bring the perpetrators to justice; however, to date, no action has been taken.

51. In January 2016, new allegations were received of cases of grave violations against children that occurred during the reporting period, involving elements of the Georgian contingent of the European Union Force and Operation Sangaris. The allegations were under investigation at the time of writing.

52. In 2015, 10 allegations of sexual violence against children committed by MINUSCA peacekeepers were reported to have involved military personnel from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (4), Morocco (1), Gabon (1), Burundi (1) and an unknown nationality (1), as well as police personnel from the Congo (1) and an unknown nationality (1). Some of the minors were sexually assaulted, while others were asked for sex in return for money, food and non-food items. As of December 2015, relevant troop-contributing countries and the Office of the Internal Oversight Services, with the support of MINUSCA, had started investigations into these allegations. The victims have received medical and psychosocial support. New allegations of violations were received in January 2016 and are being investigated.

53. Following reports of enforced disappearance, MINUSCA documented 1 child among the 11 victims allegedly killed in March 2014 by elements of the MISCA contingent from the Congo.[3] Although the families of the victims lodged complaints with the Central African Republic Gendarmerie in May 2014, an effective investigation has not yet been launched.

54. Military use of schools by international forces was also documented during the reporting period. In 2013, two contingents of the Central Africa Multinational Force used two schools in Sibut and Damara for military purposes. In 2014, five schools were used temporarily by MISCA and Operation Sangaris. The MINUSCA Force Commander and Police Commissioner have issued standing orders to their forces not to use any schools during the conduct of their activities.

[3] See Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Press briefing notes on justice for rights abuses in Nigeria, Central African Republic and Bahrain", available from www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16043&LangID=E.

55. In June 2015, I appointed an external independent review panel on sexual exploitation and abuse by international peacekeeping forces in the Central African Republic to contribute to the review of United Nations procedures to support the victims of sexual exploitation and abuse. The panel submitted its report on 17 December 2015, and I am currently reviewing its recommendations.

IV. Programmatic response

56. As noted in the section above on recruitment and use, from January 2014 to December 2015, members of the country task force separated 5,541 children from armed groups, of which nearly 90 per cent were separated from anti-Balaka. As the number of children associated with parties to the conflict increased considerably with the emergence of anti-Balaka, reintegration became challenging owing to the sheer number of cases. UNICEF and its partners opted for community-based reintegration, since a large proportion of the children had lived with their families prior to their recruitment and were mobilized by anti-Balaka on a needs basis. Only unaccompanied minors separated from anti-Balaka were cared for in host families supported by UNICEF partners. Children separated from ex-Séléka received care in transit centres and foster families through a partnership between UNICEF and international NGOs. The services provided to children as part of the reintegration package included medical screening, family tracing and reunification, psychosocial assistance and kits for returning to school or undertaking vocational training. In December 2015, the Minister of Social Affairs, Promotion of Gender and Humanitarian Action announced that a child disarmament, demobilization and reintegration policy had been approved. However, the United Nations was not aware of the details of the policy at the time of writing, in January 2016. I remain concerned by the immense challenges faced in the sustainable reintegration of these children in an environment where armed groups are still active and reintegration opportunities are limited.

V. Engagement with transitional authorities and global advocacy

57. From 2011 to 2012, the United Nations attempted to introduce mechanisms for the protection of children within State institutions and to sensitize and build the capacity of the security forces. However, all efforts stalled following the Séléka takeover and the disintegration of the security forces. Efforts were resumed in late 2014. In 2015, MINUSCA provided training on child protection to 650 Forces armées centrafricaines officers and soldiers, 94 gendarmes and 52 subprefects (municipal leaders) in Bangui.

58. Owing to the collapse of the judicial system and other core State institutions, the Security Council mandated MINUSCA to provide assistance to the transitional authorities to arrest and bring to justice those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. A memorandum of understanding establishing urgent temporary measures to restore law and order and fight impunity was signed in August 2014. On 3 June 2015, the transitional Head of State promulgated the statute creating a special criminal court to be composed of national and international judges. Two anti-Balaka members who allegedly raped a 14-year-old girl in November 2014

were arrested by MINUSCA and handed over to the national Gendarmerie (see para. 30 above) within the framework of the urgent temporary measures. However, of the over 300 individuals arrested under the urgent temporary measures, no one was arrested for committing grave violations against children.

59. My Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict and my Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide jointly visited the Central African Republic in December 2013 to assess the impact of the conflict on children, advocate for the cessation of violence and hold discussions with the then transitional authorities, MISCA and Operation Sangaris. During those discussions, my Special Representative focused on the protection of civilians and the issue of safe access to cantonment sites in order to allow for the identification and handover of children associated with armed groups. She briefed the Security Council on her visit on 22 January 2014 and advocated for sustained engagement and attention on the part of the Council, particularly on accountability and support for child reintegration. On 5 May 2014 and 3 December 2015, she also briefed the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 2127 (2013) concerning the Central African Republic to provide information on the grave violations committed against children.

60. Advocacy was undertaken in 2014 with the International Commission of Inquiry on the Central African Republic, established by the Security Council in resolution 2127 (2013), in order to highlight concerns about the situation of children affected by armed conflict in the country. The Commission released its final report in January 2015 (S/2014/928) and highlighted the grave violations committed against children. My Special Representative also engaged with the Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in the Central African Republic, in particular, following the Expert's visits to the country in February and June 2015.

61. My Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict advocated for the inclusion of child protection measures in the discussions for the cessation of hostilities. The agreement on the cessation of hostilities, signed on 23 July 2014 in Brazzaville, incorporates child protection provisions and commitments from the parties to end and prevent grave violations against children, particularly killing and maiming, recruitment and use and sexual violence. The agreement created momentum for the country task force to intensify its engagement with armed groups on the ground and to turn commitments into concrete gains, in particular with regard to the release of children. Prior to the Bangui Forum for National Reconciliation, the country task force engaged in intensive dialogue with armed groups during the negotiations between the groups and the Government. Armed groups were sensitized on the concerns about children in armed conflict situations and were requested to take measures to mitigate the impact of armed conflict on children.

VI. Engagement with armed groups

62. There were many challenges in engaging armed groups during the reporting period, owing to the evolution of the conflict, the multiplication and fragmentation of the groups involved, the fluidity of the chains of command and the frequent changes in leadership. Nevertheless, in 2011, the country task force engaged with several of the groups, which led to the adoption of action plans by APRD and CPJP in October and November 2011, respectively, to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children. Those groups have since ceased to exist.

63. Following a return to relative calm in 2014, the country task force was able to engage in dialogue with the military leadership of the RPRC and UPC factions of ex-Séléka, which led to the issuance on 3 July 2014 of a command order by RPRC General Joseph Zoundeiko prohibiting the recruitment and use of children. The command order facilitated the separation of 60 children (59 boys, 1 girl) who were handed over to a UNICEF partner. UPC military leader, Ali Mahamat Darassa, also issued a command order on 14 October 2014, which led to the release of 77 children, who were later reunited with their families. Under the terms of those orders, UNICEF was able to provide training to over 400 combatants and officers of those two factions in the Ouaka prefecture. Since then, the country task force has continued its engagement with both factions with a view to adopting action plans; however, that has been hampered by the relapse into violence in September and October 2015.

64. The country task force has not yet been able to establish a formal dialogue with anti-Balaka, owing to their unstructured nature and unclear chain of command. However, in early 2014, the task force identified entry points to engage anti-Balaka, and in April 2014 initial contacts enabled the task force to provide training on child protection to 79 commanders based in Bangui. In 2015, 145 members and commanders of anti-Balaka received similar training in Kaga-Bandoro. The training enabled the task force on monitoring and reporting to approach local commanders, who cooperated on the separation of 2,347 children (see para. 20 above).

65. On 22 October 2014, UNICEF signed a protocol with Operation Sangaris for the transfer of children in its custody to UNICEF and its partners.

66. On 5 May 2015, 10 armed groups signed an agreement committing to prevent and end the recruitment and use of children and other grave violations against children. Since the signing of the agreement, 1,475 children (1,197 boys, 224 girls) have been separated. The agreement also further opened the space for the country task force to continue to consolidate its dialogue with the parties with the view to adopting action plans.

VII. Observations and recommendations

67. I am deeply troubled by the scale and nature of violations endured by children in the Central African Republic. I urge all parties to the conflict in the Central African Republic to immediately halt grave violations against children and abide by international humanitarian and human rights law. All armed groups are urged to implement their commitments to release all children in their ranks.

68. As widespread impunity continues to prevail for perpetrators of grave violations against children, I urge the Central African Republic authorities to take immediate steps to ensure accountability. I call upon the national authorities to strengthen the country's justice system and end the culture of impunity, including through the establishment and operationalization of the Special Criminal Court. I appeal to donors to provide financial and technical support to the authorities in this regard.

69. I encourage the Central African Republic authorities to sustain their commitment to the urgent temporary measures established in accordance with Security Council resolution 2149 (2014) and to continue to work with the United

Nations to restore law and order. I also call for the criminalization of the recruitment and use of children, the expeditious ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and the implementation of policies to create a more protective environment for children.

70. I call on the Central African Republic authorities and international partners to ensure that all disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes and security sector reform take into account the rights, specific needs and protection of children affected by the armed conflict. In particular, I urge Member States and the donor community to support reintegration efforts to benefit thousands of children currently associated with armed groups in the Central African Republic. I also encourage the Central African Republic authorities, with the support of the country task force on monitoring and reporting and relevant international partners, to establish clear recruitment procedures and age-verification mechanisms to ensure that children are not recruited into armed and security forces.

71. Considering the extreme fragility of the education and health-care systems, I urge all parties to the conflict to immediately take measures to protect schools and hospitals. In this regard, I commend the commitment and efforts of the transitional authorities and welcome the endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration. I encourage the authorities to take further steps to ensure that schools are protected from the effects of conflict and call on relevant international partners to support these efforts.

72. I welcome the commitments made during the Bangui Forum on National Reconciliation by a number of armed groups to end grave violations against children, in particular recruitment and use. I urge the signatories to respect and implement their commitments and to engage in dialogue with the United Nations to develop and adopt action plans in accordance with relevant Security Council resolutions on children and armed conflict.

73. In the light of the unacceptable allegations of grave violations against children, including acts of sexual violence committed by some elements of the international forces deployed in the Central African Republic, including United Nations peacekeepers, I reiterate my unwavering commitment to redoubling efforts to prevent and address those reprehensive crimes. I am strongly committed to ensuring that all United Nations personnel comply with the United Nations zero-tolerance policy on misconduct, particularly sexual exploitation and abuse. In response to the allegations that have been brought to my attention, I urge the Member States concerned to conduct thorough and prompt investigations, which the United Nations stands ready to support.

74. I have taken serious note of the report of the external independent review of the United Nations response to allegations of sexual exploitation, abuse and other serious crimes by members of international forces, not under United Nations command, in the Central African Republic. I am currently reviewing its recommendations in order to identify the necessary actions to be taken to improve the prevention and response to such violations.